

ADHD AND THE CHANCE TO LIVE LIFE BACKWARDS

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■ ABSTRACT

The main assumption behind the current article is that academic inquiry is rooted deeply in personal biography. Using the author's own transition from theology to the study of ADHD, the text posits that this condition serves as a powerful metaphor for the Lebenswelt of the 21st century. With reference to the work of Gábor Máté and Byung-Chul Han, it concludes that recovering deep attention is a vital theological and philosophical necessity in an age defined by burnout and an "excess of positivity".

Keywords: ADHD, personal biography, Byung-Chul Han, attention, Gábor Máté

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Academic thinking including science are personal. The choice of subject of inquiry itself is telling not just about the preferences of the given society, but also about the person and his interests. What one chooses to put under the microscope magnifies also a part of who he is. This was true at the beginning of academic thought in Greece, when philosophy and science were not differentiated as they are today. The roots of Plato's interest in the ideal can be found in his family origins, just like Aristotle's interest for the functioning of organisms are likely to come from his physicist father. Both contributed strongly not only to philosophy, but also to

what we call law, sociology, biology or medicine today, and the reason behind their choice of subject lies deep in their biography.

How valid these statements are is shown by my own personal history in academic thinking. As a trained theologian, professional philosopher and bioethicist I especially leaned towards topics which were connected in many ways to my path through life. Looking at the topics of my publications, one might easily draw the line of important matters in my own life, but by reading the texts the changes in the social context behind my research are also detectable (Kovács 2009; Kovács 2010; Kovács 2014; Kovács 2021).

ADHD and 21st century life

The reason for choosing ADHD as a topic of research also lies in a personal experience. Gábor Máté, the Hungarian born physicist from Canada, uses a wonderful simile to describe the experience of a person with ADHD:

“My life, like that of many an adult with ADD, resembled a juggling act from the old Ed Sullivan show: a man spins plates, each balanced on a stick. He keeps adding more and more sticks and plates, running back and forth frantically between them as each stick, increasingly unsteady, threatens to topple over. He could keep this up only for so long before the sticks tottered and the plates began to shatter, or he himself collapsed. Something has to give, but the ADD personality has trouble letting go of anything. Unlike the juggler, he cannot stop

the performance” (Máté 1999, 11-12).

When I read Máté's lines, it reminded me not only how many roles I have to fill in my public, professional and personal life, being a rector, a researcher, a lecturer, a colleague, but also as a husband and a father. It brought the numerous personal and institutional contacts to my mind which I maintain and foster on a regular basis. Moreover, this description also reminded me of the numerous ways I'm connected with the persons and institutions through my phone, where I not only engage in individual conversations, but also initiate conference calls, pay my bills, search for information and find orientation when I'm lost in space or life. I think I'm not alone with this and Máté's simile of the spinning plates

gives an enlightening and plastic description not only of my life, but of most people living across the globe. Thus, in my opinion, ADHD

might not only refer to a set of neurological conditions but might also be used to describe our experience of the world we live in.

Byung-Chul Han: the philosopher who lives life backwards

This idea of using ADHD as a means to describe our fundamental experience of our everyday life captivated me and I was thrilled when I got Byung-Chul Han's *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* (The Burnout Society) into my hands. Similarly to Susan Sontag (Sontag 1978), Han uses illness as a metaphor to describe the basic functioning of contemporary society and also our experience of it. As he claims in *The Burnout Society* that "Every age has its signature afflictions" (Han 2015, 1). Han sees the afflictions of the early 21st century as neurological disorders and diseases such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), borderline personality disorder, and burnout. He calls the 20th century is the "bacterial age", which was ended by antibiotics, the diseases of the 21st century are not caused by infections, but by an "excess of positivity" (Han 2015, 1).

Attention and focus, however, are not only a subject of psychology, but also of philosophy and religion. Burnout does not only concern our productivity or mental well-being, but also our sense of meaning – be it philosophical or religious. This is another strong insight of Han, as he writes in his latest book *Sprechen über Gott: Ein Dialog mit Simone Weil* that "Religion presupposes an attention for things that elude availability, consumption, and devouring" (Han 2025, 12). For me, as a theologian, not only ADHD as an allegorical criticism of our lived reality turns out to be highly relevant, but also the focus on the phenomenon of attention in Han's works. The social and the psychological is thus connected to religion and becomes the subject of theology.

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